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Liminal City

Rian Dundon

University of California, Santa Cruz

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Liminal City

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By Rian Dundon

He says he's lost his city and his society. We drive past a group of demonstrators protesting land seizures. He points out the scene and the gaggle of police cruisers nearby and grins in English “this is *Chi-na*”, emphasizing the play-on-words between “Chi” and “Chai” (*chai*, or 拆 being Chinese for “dismantle” or “demolish”). He sees the city’s recent prosperity through a filter of isolation, exclusion, and greed. Tells me how the doors are all closed. How peoples’ sense of self worth is determined by the number of contacts in their cell phones. How they are drifting further apart even as they become more connected. And his city is showing growing pains. The dust and traffic from construction is unbearable but it’s the gnawing of something else that gets to him. Something darker and more sinister. *M.* tells me I don’t understand the real China and he’s right. He speaks of death and the loss of dignity as his country develops itself into oblivion. Into a casket. He says that for every building project and commercial housing development in the city (there are hundreds) there will be a handful of *laobaixing* who kill themselves over having to leave their homes. Old people who can’t just up and move to the suburbs and who would have nothing there to live for if they did. And the *mingong*, the migrant workers who labor at these sites day and night? Just last week one plummeted to death 100 meters from his apartment. Was it in the newspaper? Never. This is blasé, everyday stuff. He asks me how can I ever understand this as a foreigner. As an American no less. How can I relate to the violence of suppression and denial that haunt this place. His country. The new culture. And how can he put faith in a society that eats itself to death, let alone the government that watches it happen. Now the city is rushing to clean its image ahead of inspections from Beijing. But what is the price of being classified as a “civilized city”? *M.* laughs when he thinks about his mothers crumbling public housing complex in *Hexi* where only the buildings visible from the bridge are being “renovated” with a coat of white paint. “What’s the point of fixing the outside when the inside is what’s rotten?”

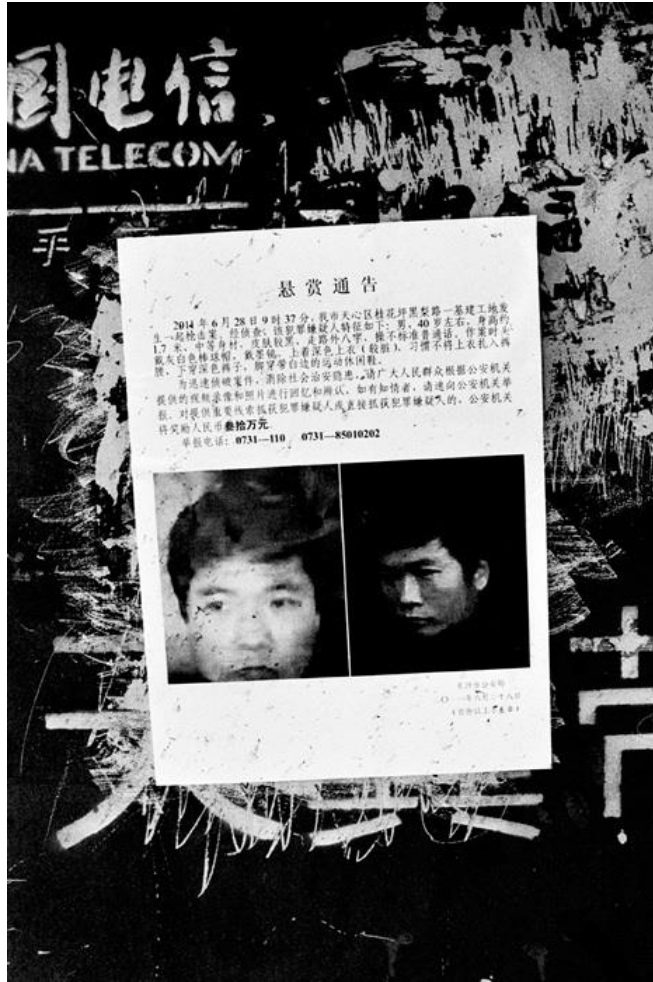
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In China’s interior provinces, where the full benefits of economic growth have yet to be realized, negotiating modernity requires hustling for a place within fresh modes of individualized experience and personal redefinition. This project traces its narrative across the diverse geographies of these liminal regions to witness how divergent notions of sex, desire, image, and identity coalesce to help shape a cultural reality not found in dominant media representations of China. Its images form a visual diary chronicling the interpersonal relationships of people living on the fringes of China’s social sphere and the vulnerability I see reflected in a generation of young people coming of age in a society set on fast-forward.

Moving beyond the urban-centric/scenic/iconic structures, which dominate the current visual record of China, this project considers the cultural dynamism of smaller provincial cities and rural prefectures far removed from China’s coastal metropolises. These marginalized spaces, borderlands of China’s rural-to-urban transformation, are a crossroads for individuals finding their own place within a fluctuating and subjective cultural (and indeed physical) landscape. If

economic growth has opened new avenues for expression in China so too have resultant ideological deviations affected the way people see themselves and their place in the world. This project looks to provide visual evidence of that reality by focusing on the differentiated actualities of life in an environment of sustained cultural flux.

















[Rian Dundon](#) is a photographer and masters student in Social Documentation at University of California, Santa Cruz, where he is researching and preparing a forthcoming book of photographs from interior China. His work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at New York University, The Camera Club of New York, Angkor Photo Festival, and Caochangdi PhotoSpring. Follow him on Twitter [@riandundon](#) and see his series “Behind the Scenes with Fan Bingbing” [here](#).